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Contact:

Margot Isman

Office of Representative Kate Hogan

(617) 722-2060, HYPERLINK "mailto:margot.isman@state.ma.us"

margot.isman@state.ma.us

Legislature Passes Sweeping Ethics Reform Legislation

(Boston)—State Representative Kate Hogan (D-Stow) joined her colleagues in a unanimous vote to pass a sweeping ethics reform bill that strengthens current ethics, lobbying and campaign finance laws, enhancing the integrity of the political process and helping to restore public trust. The consensus bill not only bans gifts to public officials, but also increases the authority of the Ethics Commission to investigate and prosecute alleged ethics violations. The bill was approved unanimously in both the House and the Senate, and is expected to be signed by the Governor soon.

House co-chair of the Joint Committee on Ethics Representative Peter Kocot (D-Northampton) praised the legislation, saying that “these reforms demonstrate that our political system in Massachusetts is not for sale.” Representative Hogan agreed. “I’m proud of passing these reforms, and proud to be a strong advocate for openness and transparency in state government.”

The legislation bans all gifts to public officials, imposing a hefty civil violation for gifts up to \$1,000 and making it a felony for anything with value greater than \$1,000. The felony charge for gifts greater than \$1,000 would carry a penalty of 5 years in prison, a \$10,000 fine, or both, and would apply to both the recipient of the gift and the giver.

A new lobbyist classification redefines and clarifies lobbying activities and captures actions that seek to wrongly influence official government activity. The legislation defines “lobbyist” as anyone paid to promote, oppose or influence, or to attempt to influence the decision of any officer or employee of the executive or legislative branch and requires that lobbyists count all research and planning around legislation as lobbying activity.

The bill passed on the same day that Representative Hogan offered testimony on H2972, which would create a comprehensive and easily searchable website that details all state expenditures. In her testimony, she argued that the use of technology to further transparency in state government is “long overdue.” She also hopes that this bill would be a step toward empowering citizens with information, in order to better understand the activities of their government. “Knowledge is power, and transparency is empowering,” she said.

